DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 137 963 EA 009 441

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TITLE Non-Traditional Approaches to Student Evaluation.
PUB DATE 25 Feb 77
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Association of School Administrators (109th, Las Vegas, Nevada, February 25-28, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Achievement; Change Strategies; Educational Change; *Grading; Middle Schools; *Program Descriptions; Report Cards; Secondary Education; *Student Behavior; *Student Evaluation
IDENTIFIERS Fredericksburg City Schools VA

ABSTRACT

Walker-Grant Middle School has moved from the traditional failure-oriented method of measuring student progress to one that measures continuous student progress. The concept of standards for each grade and subject was replaced by the concept of "taking the child where he is and working from that point." Under the old system, a student's grade was not a measure of his progress as much as it was a measure of how well he completed the teacher's assignments. The new system measures how well he achieved the objectives and completed the tasks set by the teacher. The system is stated clearly in both the student handbook and the teacher's handbook. A supplementary report is used to assess student behavior and explain to the parent why the child is not enjoying success. This form is required for all students who are making inadequate academic progress. In addition, standardized achievement tests are administered each year, and test results are sent home to parents along with detailed instructions on interpreting test results. (Author/JG)

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TOPIC: Non-Traditional Approach to Student Evaluation
TIME: Friday, February 25, 8:00 a.m.
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NON-TRADITIONAL APPROACHES TO STUDENT EVALUATION

Several developments within the Walker-Grant Middle School where I serve as principal and in the Fredericksburg City Public Schools of which we are a part caused us to examine our methods of measuring student progress and of reporting this progress to parents. Under the influence of William Glasser, Lloyd Trump, and other humanistic educational leaders and schools in Fredericksburg have moved from the traditional failure-oriented syndrome to one of continuous progress. This change was an evolutionary process and occurred over a period of years. The concept of "standards" for each grade and for each subject within that grade was replaced with the concept of "taking the child where he is and working from that point".

The second development which influenced the approaches we employed to measure student progress and to report such progress to parents was the emphasis placed upon accountability. Whereas the schools - and the teachers within them - had for years enjoyed a level of omnipotence concerning what took place within these portals such was no longer true. Parents, frustrated by increasing child-related problems and by higher and higher costs of education, began to demand to know what were the children - and more importantly - what were the parents getting for their money.

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I felt strongly that we were not adequately assessing student progress and that we were doing a poor job of reporting student progress to parents. I made a determined effort to examine the current state of affairs. I discerned that although there was supposed to be a system-wide policy of basing grades on

percentages (95+ for A, 88-94 for B, etc.) that anything but a uniform system was being employed. An examination of teacher grade books disclosed a wide variety of codes and approaches for determining student grades. I state, without hesitation, that there were as many systems of determining grades as there were teachers in the school. It also became abundantly clear that a students' grade was not a measure of his progress as much as it was a measure of how well he completed the teacher's assignments. In some cases these assignments bore little relationship to teaching or learning. The grades as determined by the teacher were sent home each six weeks on a more-or-less standard report card. Two other information avenues were open to parents. (1) The school conducted an open house one night each semester; (2) the parent could arrange a conference with an individual teacher.

In addition to teacher-made grades the students in this school were given standardized tests. The results of these tests were not sent home but were interpreted to parents in conferences upon parent request. Seventh grade students were administered the California Tests of Mental Maturity and eighth grade students completed the Differential Aptitude Tests. Some achievement tests were employed in this school division but no achievement tests were administered in the middle school years.

Four questions grew out of this assessment of grading and reporting:
1.) how could we improve on the reliability of teacher-made grades?
2.) what standardized tests would help us better assess the progress of Walker-Grant's students? 3.) how can we determine what teaching is needed and

what learning has resulted from classes at Walker-Grant? 4.) how can we improve our communication of student progress to parents? I propose to look at each question in order.

The problem of the reliability of teacher-made grades was difficult due no small part to the ambiguity of grades and the underlying sensitivity of the teachers who derived them. I challenge you to look within your own schools. It will surprise me if you do not find some teacher who makes student behavior a basis for grading. It will surprise me if you do not find a teacher whose grades are computed to fractions of points consequently resulting in a student failing with an average of 74.9 or in missing an A by two-tenths of a point. I would furthermore be surprised if some principals in your divisions have not made attendance a requirement for passing a course. Thus grades have come to mean more than academic progress. It became clear that the first step to improving reliability of grades was to define what such a grade would measure. This was accomplished by determining what a grade would not measure. A Walker-Grant grade would not measure a student's behavior. It would not measure his attendance in class. It would not measure how many times he arrived at class without a pencil. It would measure how well he achieved the objectives and completed the tasks set forth by the teacher. I do not mean that these areas are unimportant - only that student behavior and discipline should not be a factor in determining a student's measure of academic progress. A separate system is needed to measure student behavior and when necessary - to report this to parents.

I have long contended and am prepared to debate that numerical grading systems lend false credence to student's grades. Grading is at best a generalized judgement. Because of my conviction numbers are treated as raw scores only and are employed at Walker-Grant only to determine the student's letter grade. The faculty and I discussed grading from many points of view ranging from complete abandonment of grades to exact numerical systems. We determined that the old-fashioned A to F was more or less universally understood by teachers, parents, and students. The A grade means excellent, the B above average, the C average, the D means little progress and F means a level of achievement constituting failure. Having reached this point I established that such a system would be employed throughout the school. All grades are recorded as letter grades on student papers, in teacher grade books, and on permanent records. The system is stated clearly in both the student handbook and in the teacher's handbook. This helped make grades less a mystery to everyone concerned.

A second step was implemented when a teacher-designed supplementary report was instituted. This form consists of a series of statements - some positive and some negative - which the teacher sends home midway through the grading period. This form is required for all students who are suffering inadequate academic progress. Statements included on the form attempt to explain to the parent why the student is not enjoying success. For example a teacher may indicate that, "The above named student is in danger of failing this class"., and in addition check statements that, "The student needs outside

and/or additional help in this subject". It is evident that the parent of a student receiving such a report has a good picture of the problem his child faces and can react to correct that problem.

These efforts have, I feel, greatly added to the reliability of the teacher-made grade in that the parent, teacher and student were now talking about the same things.

The second question - "What standardized tests could help us assess our students?", was answered by a division-wide assessment of standardized tests. The decision was made to employ the Science Research Achievement Tests for grades 1 through 12. The data from these tests have afforded an opportunity to diagnose student progress grade-by-grade and subject-by-subject. This testing program has been in effect for four years and has added significantly to the improvement of the instructional program. Test results are sent home to parents along with detailed instructions on interpreting test results. We quickly realized, however, that the items included on the sub-test are inadequate in number to provide good diagnostic information for designing instruction. One danger in such testing is, I believe, the temptation to employ tests data in manners which are unsuited to the data itself. The inclusion of achievement testing on every grade level has, we feel, significantly strengthened this type of assessment of student progress.

The third question - that of determining what instruction is needed and of determining what learning has actually taken place here at Walker-Grant -

appears the most difficult question to answer. This appearance is not accidental nor is a simple solution available. This does not eliminate the importance of attempting to answer this question for without such knowledge we are at best playing a hit-or-miss game in the dark!

Walker-Grant began its efforts to answer the question by assessing as a faculty the purposes of our existence. This has been an ongoing process that continues today. More specifically each area of the instructional program has asked itself, "What are the objectives of this class? What knowledge do the students need? What skills are important to them?" These questions appear abstract but are, in fact, concrete. Until such time as a teacher will attack this problem he will always be left with opinion as his guide. I do not think something as important and as expensive as public school instruction can be left to opinion.

After determining the key elements of each aspect of the school's program the teacher is faced with the task of determining a measuring device which will demonstrate to him when a student has mastered each element. Normally this will take the form of a test of some sorts; a test which has traditionally been administered <u>after</u> the instruction has taken place. The teacher is left, however, with no concrete evidence that the learning occurred as a result of his instructional efforts. Consider, however, the position of the teacher if the test had been administered prior to his instruction. The student who demonstrated a deficiency on the test when tested prior to instruction and whose deficiency disappeared when retested following instruction has demonstrated the results of

learning - hopefully as a direct result of the instructor's efforts. This system of pre-testing and post-testing has become standard practice here at Walker-Grant. The results have been exciting and impressing. The teachers have often discovered through pre-testing that the materials included in the unit had been mastered elsewhere by some - or in a few cases - by all of the class. The teacher was thereby spared repeating the efforts of some teacher who had preceded him.

The pre-test and post-test approach has not been perfect by any means but it has been beneficial in that the teachers have become acutely aware of their instructional goals and of their personal responsibility to help the students achieve them.

In answering the first three questions posed by this paper I have gone a long way towards answering the final question - "How to improve the communication of students progress to parents?" We improved upon our efforts to communicate student progress by clearifying the meaning of teacher-made grades. The inclusion of interim reports midway through each grading period was a meaningful change. Finally the adoption of a comprehensive standardized testing program which supplied data to the parents on an annual basis made a significant difference in informing the parent of his child's progress.

Our efforts to inform the parents about their child's life at school had, in many instances, been negative in flavor. The parent-teacher conference is a case in point. We discovered that nearly all of these conferences resulted

from the child having a problem in one teacher's class. This set the stage for hostility since the child invariably reported to his parent that the source of the problem rested with the teacher. The negative nature of parent-teacher conferences which were classroom-problem based was enhanced by the fact that the parent had no opportunity to obtain information about the successes his child might have enjoyed in other facets of school. The faculty and I discussed how this situation might be reversed. "How", we asked ourselves, "can we turn this negative situation into a positive one?" Our answer was to involve all of the child's teachers in group conference situations. Rather than have each teacher arrange his conference a school policy was instituted that all teacher-parent conferences would be arranged through the guidance office. The counselors selected a time for the conference, notified the teachers of the child and the principal, and served as conference moderator.

A teacher who was unable to attend the conference was expected to provide input in the conference by submitting a written report on the student. This report included information about his academic progress, his behavior, and about his attitudes in class. I am delighted to report that these conferences were highly positive in nature and that the school personnel and parent nearly always molded themselves into a group which jointly sought solutions to the child's problems. Because few children had difficulties in all classes there was positive input as well as negative. Later, at the request of the students, the student was included in these conferences. This added significantly to the group's effort to get to the root of the problem - a necessary starting point for finding a solution. The group conference has been one of our most successful

and comprehensive attempts to transmit a child's progress in school to his parents.

Throughout this presentation I have attempted to be positive. I have purposefully dwelled upon our successes and not our failures. I have told you about our concerted efforts to improve the level of understanding between the school and home - efforts which have contributed towards making this a happier place to live and work. Underlying the efforts of the faculty and staff of this school is a deep belief that the parents and school share a common concern for the child. I have seen much to convince me that this concept is valid. I believe that with few exceptions when the parent and school appear to differ the difference is usually one of communication and not of values or concerns. This belief has been the basis for the changes which have been incorporated into the policies and practices of the Walker-Grant Middle School as regards our efforts to communicate student progress to parents.